Dallas News staff photos by Steve Ueckert.

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Former officer relives past in 'Ruby'

By DOUG DOMEIER

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Mel Stuart, director of the 3-hour Nov. 24, 1963.

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The scene was harsh, confused, painfully familiar. A young man in a black sweater was escorted by police through a crowd of reporters and photographers in an underground parking garage.

He grimaced with pain and slumped to the ground when a stocky man pushed a gun in his stomach and fired.

Unlike a Sunday morning almost 14 years ago, the participants could repeat the shooting several times, and they were surrounded by the somewhat comforting confusion of moviemaking.

They worked about three hours here Sunday to recreate the slaying of Lee Harvey Oswald by nightclub owner Jack Ruby for a made-for-television movie, "Ruby and Oswald."

Oswald, named by the Warren Commission as John F. Kennedy's assassin, was shot by Ruby at 11:21 a.m. Nov. 24, 1963. Oswald died shortly afterward at Parkland Memorial Hospital; Ruby died years later of cancer.

Mel Stuart, director of the 3-hour color film, which ends production Tuesday, seeks to make a realistic dramatization of the assassination events "based on the best information we can get."

The best man to answer if he was succeeding Sunday was J.R. Leavelle, the only person in the recreation who played himself. Oswald was handcuffed to Leavelle, then a homicide detective, when Ruby rushed forward to shoot.

Leavelle, retired several years from the police department, again walked through the doors to the garage Sunday with Oswald (portrayed by Frederic Forrest) handcuffed to him.

"It was almost identical to the real thing," Leavelle said later. He wore the same suit and tie he did Nov. 24, 1963.

A representative of Alan Landsburg Productions, makers of the film, contacted Leavelle several weeks ago and asked if he'd be interested in playing himself.

Leavelle said he would be agreeable if the film were documentary in approach. He said Sunday the script has only a "few discrepancies," namely having Oswald "flare up" in several scenes.

Oswald was "rather reserved," said Leavelle, who questioned him earlier. Production workers asked Leavelle for advice Sunday on technical points.

An easy figure to spot in red knit shirt and blue denims, Stuart claims he's read every major work on the assassination and is reaching for maximum authenticity.

The production company is using other Dallas locations: Dealey Plaza, where the Kennedy assassination took place, the Oak Cliff street where officer J.D. Tippit was shot and Oswald's boarding house.

Looking for the "truth" about Oswald, "how he lived," was the most difficult aspect of playing him, said Forrest, a Waxahachie native and graduate of Texas Christian University.

For Michael Lerner, portraying Ruby meant trying to show two sides, "emotional and violent but also sweet, wanting to be a good guy."

One of the blanks fired at Forrest at close range burned his left arm and he required treatment between takes.

The film will be shown on CBS television, probably in November, although no broadcast date has been chosen.

Earlier this summer, another film linked to the Kennedy assassination, "The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald," also involved a company doing location work here.